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THE MODERN EXTINCTION OF GENIUS.

BY JULIEN GORDON.

I READ in a daily journal a short time ago an article of gloomy portent upon the decline in the number of writers of genius, and the yet sadder decadence in the quality of their gifts. The most deplorable aspect of tirades like this is the fact that there are many persons who will not only peruse, but believe them. It is only the very presumptuous who assert that they are uninfluenced by what they read. The cursory reader is but too prone to accept hastily the views and decisions at which he carelessly glances. The power of the pen is immensurable; one drop of printer's ink carries more weight than rivers of eloquence. Few men have the time, and few women the culture and patience, to think for themselves. They lack a certain stoutness of self-respect; they have a timorousness which pushes them to accept the narrowing iteration of platitudes. Our opinions are usually formed for us by somebody else, one thinker being sufficient for a community. Strangely enough there is in the average reader a low vitality, a certain tendency to the foreboding of evil, which serves to easily imbue him with unsound and fallacious dogmas in the domain of criticism.

To the inconsolable Jeremiahs who insist upon the superiority of writers of the past I would suggest that there are estimable elderly ladies who declare that men have lost all ardor, not to say politeness, in their commerce with the other sex; and at a dinner party last winter an old gentleman was heard to remark that he marvelled that truffles were still eaten, in the face of the fact that they had lost their flavor. There may be those who prefer the prose of Pherecydes of Syros to that of the present day. I would not molest them. There may be those who insist that the diction of our modern thinkers and poets and philosophers lacks the freshness of a Herodotus, the power of a Livy, the firework blaze of a Tacitus. To come nearer to our own day, there may be those,

again, who admire the writer—we will say of Addison's time—who began a poem or an oration by wildly invoking himself, his muse, and other people, with rending of the garments and tearing of the hair, lest his own or his reader's imagination should fail to be awakened. I will not go to the opposite extreme and underrate the old writers because their taste differs so frequently from ours ; but when I compare one of these old-fashioned contortionists with the terse, breezy, and simple modern, with the directness and dignity with which he at once launches upon his theme, I cannot but feel that there has been growth. The modern has learned, it would seem to me, to avoid the bombast which exalts *outré mesure*, as well as the shoals of an undue frigidity which degrades and belittles all that it touches.

I will speak now only of modern fiction, and will dwell briefly even upon this theme. My space would not allow, if my modesty would permit, me to attempt the difficult task of a serious dissertation.

It would seem that, during the last hundred years, fiction, from being a mere trick of story-telling, has been raised into a loftier realm. It has, in fact, become a high art. The fine, close analysis of motive, the keen, trenchant observation of the human heart, the psychological study of the passions, so much in vogue at the present day, have placed it and its aims upon a different plane. It is no longer possible that an earnest and reflective generation should seriously occupy itself in following through three books and thirty chapters the rompings of an ill-conditioned schoolgirl with two or three insipid and mildly-adoring young gentlemen, until she is finally captured by one of them, at eighteen, and led to the altar, when the curtain falls to slow music upon a wedding-breakfast. I am not, of course, speaking now of a literature for the schoolroom and nursery: These have their uses. I am speaking of a literature for men and women of mature powers. Those who cannot find among living writers suitable aliment must be, indeed, peculiarly devoid of acumen and appreciation. Who, indeed, could have the courage to-day to wade through hundreds of pages full of peasants' dislocated dialect and servants' insignificant squabbles to find that a heroine of fifteen and her boy lover of seventeen, after a sufficient number of vicissitudes and hair-breadth adventures, were to be forever contented ? I have often asked myself if in

past days—since it is to be presumed that novelists paint the sentiments at the period in which they find them—it were possible that the tumults and tempests of the emotions filled the hearts of mere children at an age when our young men are preparing for college and our maidens playing with dolls. Either children matured earlier than now, or novelists were careless observers and noted little of the deeper and subtler experiences of ripe character.

Is it not absurd that we, who have the honor and the happiness of breathing the same air as a Tolstoi, a De Maupassant, a Meredith, a Stevenson, a Bret Harte, a Kipling, should be paralyzed and thwarted by this constant plaint of the insufficiency of present achievement? Why need the partisans of the departed be always under arms in an atmosphere charged with missiles? The past standards and our own cannot be the same; the necessary outcome of the times must make them different. When we have said that the present tendency is to simplicity and terseness, to the story and the *nouvelle* instead of the ponderous three-volume tome of the past,—we except the two longer romances of the great Russian,—we have said that change is in the order of life; that novelty is the touchstone which awakens imagination. We cannot believe that the afflatus of inspiration is even momentarily voiceless.

And first to turn to the Russians. I would wish to speak of Dostoiévsky, the incomparable, the immortal, perhaps yesterday the greatest of modern novelists, but whose strange personality, whose restless, fevered brain, has found the hard-won victory, wrested at last from strife with poverty, injustice, and despair. But I will confine myself to living authors and narrow myself down to an anguish of modernity. First and foremost stands before us Tolstoi, the author of “War and Peace,” of that sombre, soul-stirring story of “Katia,” whose immeasurable art is almost drowned in the dark waves of its ineffable melancholy, and of the greatest novel of the century, “Anna Karénina.” Shall it be said of Tolstoi that there is any one in the past who can overshadow him? make one star of his diadem to pale?—the pure moralist, the great artist, the poet-realist, who has laved his garments in the woes of humanity and held a world’s pulsing heart in his giant palm?

Or, turning to the most perfect school of modern literary art, what have we in the past which can equal the vigor of the French style, conjoined with its exquisite elegance and finish? Who has

surpassed Daudet, with his masterpiece of "Les Rois en Exile"; De Maupassant, with his gems of "A Cheval," "Au Bois," and his late *étude* of a frightful, impotent warfare waged against a Providence which has doomed man so cruelly to watch the gradual processes of his own decay? Then have we not Paul Bourget, the baffled, cynical man of the world, masking the *naïf* with his protest of love and tears? How cool and clear his hand! how chaste his style, devoid of affectation of the turgid and the exaggerated!

And what shall be said of Robert Louis Stevenson, with his lurid questionings, whose answers have made men tremble? Has he no genius? And shall we not be thankful for our own Bret Harte, with his beautiful idyl, "In the Carquinez Woods," or his still deeper story of temptation and repentance, "The Twins of Table Mountain"?

What proves to us the abundance of contemporaneous talent is that such creations as Valera's "Pepita Ximenez" and Chesney's "Dilemma" are but the wonders of an hour. Mrs. Burnett, Charles Egbert Craddock, Howells, and a score of others—I name but half a dozen from a galaxy of brilliant writers—are artists whom it would be a folly to rank below their precursors. This depreciation of present art is not only uncritical; it is destructive. Has it not barked into dismay that fair child of the South whose genius we could ill spare? Talent cannot be killed: it may be silenced.

This pessimistic view is in some of the mourners a sign of senility, in others of immaturity. But while the complaints of age are always pathetic, those of the young are pointless and foolish—an oft-repeated magpie's cry, as exhausting to the bird upon the bough as to the man who sits under it. Beauty, sublimity, elegance, humor, wit, are not mere chimeras; they still breathe. We shall not learn them; they are ours. Let us dare, then, to be ourselves, to avoid those restraints, those timidities, imposed upon us by a generation which, having done with life, insists that life is done. The Lord said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The fiat for darkness has not yet gone forth, nor for a general amnesty of those forces which create the joy-giving beam. Life and light are eternal, and genius, immortal child, still beckons to all youth, smiling, with its divine invitation.

JULIEN GORDON,